[James E. Coan]

Project #3613

W. W. Dixon

Winnsboro, S. C. JAMES E. COAN

(white) 73 YEARS OLD

James E. Coan, a retired business man, resides in a two-story frame house in the suburbs of the town of Winnsboro. He is 5 feet 8 inches in height and weighs 160 pounds. He has a florid complexion, sandy hair, and blue eyes. Mr. Coan is a good talker and is full of wit and humor.

“My ancestry on my father's side is Scotch-Irish, immigrants to South Carolina from Belfast, Ireland. My grandfather, William Coan, married Elizabeth Otts. My father, James E. Coan, married Harriet Zimmerman. The Zimmermans were Dutch or Germans of Orangeburg, South Carolina.

“My father owned a plantation at Center Point, Spartanburg District, before the Civil War. Its name has been changed to Moore's Station. I was born near this station the 19th day of September, 1865. This home of father's was not far from Reidville Female College. This college had a primary department for the children in the community, and here is where I first went to school. I began in the blue-backed speller, and while I've forgotten the authors of all other text books, I remember the author of this one and how it was arranged. Noah Webster was the author of this great old book. The alphabet came first; then columns of ba, be, bi, bo, bu, going through consonants coupled with the vowels, a, e, i, o, u. At the back of the book were pictures and reading matter setting forth fables. I recollect the

names of some of those, 'The Country Maid and Her Milk Pail,' 'The Two Dogs,' 'The Partial Judge,' 'The Fox and the Bramble,' and 'The Bear and the Two Friends.'

2

The one about 'The Partial Judge' might interest you. A farmer came to a lawyer who had an adjoining farm in the country, not a far way from town, and expressed great concern for an accident which had just happened, by saying, 'One of your oxen has been gored to death by my bull, and I should like to know how I am to make a proper compensation for the injury?' 'You are an honest fellow,' replied the lawyer, 'and will not think it unjust that I expect you to give me one of your oxen in return.' 'It is no more than justice.' quoth the farmer. 'But I made a mistake, it was your bull that gored one of my oxen to death.' 'Indeed,' said the lawyer, 'that alters the case. I must enquire into the case, and if——.' 'And if,' said the farmer, 'you were as prompt to do justice to others as you are to exact it from them, the case could be settled here and now, but with you it depends upon whose ox is gored.'

“Our hours in school were from 8 a. m. to 4 p. m., with an intermission of two hours for dinner. For recreation, we played games, such as town ball, base, and fox.

“We had a spelling class every evening. Boys and girls, without regard to sex or age, were lined up in the schoolroom. The words were taken by the teacher from the blue-booked speller. The first word was given to the child at the head of the column. If spelled correctly, the next word was given to the second in line and thus the lesson went on down the line. When the pupil misspelled the word given, it was passed to the pupil next in line. Should he or she misspell the word, it was passed on until correctly spelled by some other pupil, who 'trapped' up to a place in the line above the pupil that first missed it. A pupil who stood head one day, went to the foot the next day. At the end of the session, the pupil standing head the greatest number of times got a prize and was declared to be the best speller in school. I remember one occasion when I went from foot to head on the word 'soire.'

3

“My next teacher was Professor R. O. Sams, and the last teacher was Professor William B. Morrison, who wound up his career at Clemson College. Professor Morrison was a fine teacher, especially in history and mathematics. When he was teaching at Welford, Spartanburg County, we had to declaim and write compositions alternating with declamations.

“Some of these declamations often run through my head after a lapse of fifty years: Longfellows Psalm of Life' Let us then be up and doing, With a heart for any fate; Still achieving, still pursuing, Learn to labor and to wait.

“Tennyson's Crossing The Bar: Sunset and evening star, And one clear call for me! And may there be no moaning of the bar When I put out to sea.

“Gray's Elegy: The boast of heraldry the pomp of power, And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave Await alike the inevitable hour; The paths of glory lead but to the grave.

“There was a girl in the Welford school that could recite the whole of Poe's Raven, word for word, and bring tears to your eyes.

“My father ran a store and farmed near Welford. I assisted both on the farm, and in the store. When I quit school, I went as a clerk in the mercantile part of my father's business, a part of which was buying cotton from neighbors 4 who ran an account at our store during the year. I become interested in cotton, as a buyer of the baled staple. I went over to Gaffney and learned how to grade cotton under Carroll & Stacey, who had the McFaddon Agency then. Having learned something about the subject, I came to Winnsboro on October 8, 1888, and bought cotton in the surrounding territory, which included Blackstock, Woodward, White Oak, Simpson, and Ridgeway.

“There was strong competition in the cotton-buying business in those days. We bought a hundred points off the New York market. Now we buy on the flat New York quotation. I was still buying for the McFadden Agency through Walker, Flemming & Sloan of

Spartanburg, successors to Carroll & Stacey of Gaffney. 'Middling white' was the basis in grading at that time. Manner of preparation and presence of trash also entered into the classification. Above 'middling white' were the grades 'strict middling,' 'good middling,' 'strict good middling' and 'middling fair and fancy.'

“The lower grades 'strict low middling,' 'low middling,' 'strict good ordinary,' 'ordinary,' 'tingers' and 'stains.'

“I next did business buying cotton for Heath Springs & Company, of Lancaster, South Carolina. Afterwards I bought for M. C. Heath of Columbia, South Carolina, and then on my own responsibility at Winnsboro.

“It takes a man of strong nerve, great physical endurance, and well poised mind to stay long in this kind of business. For instance, you may have a thousand bales of cotton on six different platforms in Fairfield County. A change of one cent in the market amounts to $5.00 a bale. I have been richer or poorer by $2,500.00 many a day, and legitimate business at that, I assure you. It drives some to drink, a few to bankruptcy, many to the asylum, and a few to the penitentiary.

“If Mr. Roosevelt does nothing else in his administration, he deserves a 5 moment as high as the Empire State Building for his reform of the New York Cotton Exchange.

“My brothers and sisters? Well, I had six sisters and one brother, but the only ones living are Mrs. [?]. J. Nesbit and Mrs. W. G. Query, wife of the chairman of the State Tax Commission in Columbia, South Carolina.

“You ask about changes in fashions? Well, I think I'll let some lady tell you about the fashions. Maybe I could interest you more in the change of mind in respect to certain phrases of mental attitudes.

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“From 1865 to 1895, the mental attitude of the white people of this State toward lynching was unmistakably for lynching a man, white or black, who raped a white woman of her virtue. I will relate an incident of which I was witness at the lynching. A white girl, an orphan, who was being cared for in the town of Spartanburg, received permission to spend the week end with her uncle. She left Spartanburg one afternoon to walk the distance. Night overtook her near Moore's station. She approached a farmer's home and told the lady of her plight and begged to stay all night. She, a fine woman, readily agreed. She gave the girl supper and breakfast. As she was about to leave the next morning, the lady offered to let her little boy go with her to the forks in the road and show her which fork to take, a shorter way by a path through the woods. The husband of the lady volunteered to do this mission, saying that he was going that direction to where his hands were ploughing a field. The man and the girl sat out together. When they reached the woods, he pointed out the path, which they took. In the densest part of the woods, he made an attack on her, and she fought him like a tigress, to protect her honor. He accomplished his base purpose and then, fearing exposure, killed her, hiding her body in the thick undergrowth.

6

“Days passed. A Negro, seeing turkey buzzards flying over the spot in great numbers, went to investigate and found the decomposed body. The whole community arose up to avenge her death, an outrage. The sheriff acted quickly. He arrested the man and placed him in the Spartanburg jail. The mob formed. The sheriff hearing of its coming, formed a plan to take the prisoner to the South Carolina penitentiary, by way of Charlotte, on the passenger train of the Southern Railway. His plan was to rush the prisoner to a culvert under the railroad out of town, hold him there and flag the train down on its approach, take him to Charlotte and thence to the penitentiary in Columbia. The sheriff telegraphed his plans to the Governor and asked that His Excellency call out the Morgan Rifles to protect the jail.

“The mob, composed of 400 citizens, had some astute men in it. Spies were sent out to watch and report the sheriff's movements and designs. From their reports, the mob of 400 didn't stop at the jail but proceeded on horseback up the railroad to the culvert spot where the prisoner was hidden. Arriving, the mob demanded him of the sheriff. A detachment of soldiers with fixed bayonets stood guard before the culvert.

“A parley took place between the sheriff and the mob. The sheriff said he would resist force with force. The leader of the mob then gave the order. 'Every fourth man hold four horses. The others fall in line, four abreast , behind me.' He then said: 'Sheriff, we all respect and like you. We know some of our four hundred will be killed, but, as sure as there is a God in Heaven, all of you will be killed, for we will get that d—n raper.' The sheriff gave way under protest. Four of the mob went into the culvert under the railroad and brought the prisoner out, still handcuffed. He begged to be allowed to see his wife and his Uncle Baxter before he died, so as to arrange his business affairs for his family's welfare. The request was granted.

7

“The cavalcade came by home. My brother came in for a sandwich, and I joined the mob as a fourteen-year-old spectator. They rode on to the spot where the body of the girl was found, after permitting the private interview with his wife and uncle. They put a rope around his neck, stood him up on the seat of a buggy, drove to an overhanging limb of a forest tree, halted, adjusted the rope over the limb, and drove the horse and buggy from under his feet. Hands manacled behind his back, he wriggled awhile and died by strangulation.

“With a few attendants, his body was given burial in a cemetery near Welford. The girl is interred in the cemetery at Duncan, Spartanburg County. Over five hundred people attended her funeral, and, very likely, it was there and then that indignation reached the height wherein the purpose to lynch the fiend was formed. Of course, this rapist deserved a legal death, but not an illegal hanging. What caused it? Lack of reverence for law, arguments by attorneys in a plea of the so-called unwritten law in murder cases, where

one man catches another man in a compromising position with his wife or close relative. Back of 1895, I have heard these pleas for lynching, 'The voice of the people is the voice of God,' and 'You can't indict a whole county nor a majority of a community when the vote of a whole people cry out for swift justice.' These ideas were elongated and strengthened when some of our governors publicly promulgated, 'To Hell with the constitution, when a Negro rapes a white woman. I am willing to head a mob to hang him as high as Haman.'

“Strange to say, the lynching of the white man set the press to writing, the people to thinking, and the Constitutional Convention of 1896 to enacting a clause against lynching.

“While Congress may never enact its sectional lynching law proposal, it has produced discussion and will have a good moral effect in decreasing lynching of 8 Negroes in the South. The effect and result of this bill in Congress is as salutary and educative as the failure of the Supreme Court bill and the Wages and Hours bill. Each bill failed in passage, but the objective seems practically accomplished.

“There is one other incident in my boyhood life in Spartanburg that I must relate in regard to my attitude of being opposed to conviction in a homicide case on purely circumstantial evidence.

“In 1881, Pot Hawkins, a Negro, was killed outside of Byrd's Grocery store on Church Street. Byrd and the Negro were in a struggle in front of the store where Byrd had followed Hawkins. Thomas White, wearing a linen duster coat, a garment much worn in those days, came up in an intoxicated condition and interferred in the fight. Byrd shot the Negro and dropped the pistol in White's coat pocket. The police attracted by the shooting arrived immediately and found the Negro dead. Thomas White was still on the scene, with the pistol in his pocket, one empty shell recently fired and five loaded shells still in the chambers. White was arrested. Later he was tried, condemned, and hanged for murder of Pot Hawkins. Years afterward, on his deathbed, Byrd confessed all the circumstances of the fight, his ownership of the weapons, and his shooting the Negro. So you see now

why I answer 'no' to the judge in court when he asks me if I believe in convicting a man on circumstantial evidence.

“In 1894, I married the youngest daughter of Dr. J. Riley McMaster of Winnsboro. Marian and I have been blessed with two children, both girls. The oldest, Harriet, is Mrs. Jno. W. Calvert of Abbeville, South Carolina, and the younger, Elizabeth, is Mrs. John H. Cathcart of Gaffney, South Carolina.

“I served four successive terms as mayor of Winnsboro and one unexpired term. When I was first elected mayor, the town was lighted by kerosene lamps, and we were 9 without waterworks and drainage. There was not a paved street in the town. Now all the streets are paved, thanks to W.P.A.'s aid. We have an up-to-date sewerage system, and the town is lighted by electricity.

“In the business of cotton buying, by contact with manufacturers, visiting mills, observation of relationship between employers and employees, I have reached certain conclusions on one of the main subjects agitating the world and our country today, that is the question of capital and labor. I believe that organized labor should be one of cooperation with the employer for their mutual benefit, increased benefits for all. The fight for unionization and collective bargaining is over, and the lingering spirit of combativeness should not be encouraged to survive.

“When asked for an increase of wage, the employer is most likely to say, in all sincerity, 'I can't afford it.' How much better it might be in most instances at juncture, were the union, instead of resorting to a strike to enforce the demand, to say, 'We think we can show you a way to save enough money to give us an increase.' This might be shown the employer in ways known to the union, such as reducing cost somewhere or preventing waste in the process of producing the goods. An offer of something to the employer in exchange for what the employees want. If the union would adopt such pacific measures, it would result in a higher value of bargaining power.

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“Unions should have a research committee; intelligent, fair-minded, conscientious, and not contentious. It could make a rough survey of the possibilities in a cooperative spirit with a committee appointed by the employer in the survey. Out of such arrangement, each side could see the other's point of view.

“Along about 1898 to 1906, the old time foreman of a cotton mill thought he had a right to hire and fire as he pleased, and that an operator had no rights except to work, whatever the conditions might be, and receive his pay. To 10 question him why he fired a man seemed to him an inquisitorial offensive invasion of his rights, and high officers of many mills had the same opinions. Now, instead of this 'You do it because I say so' attitude, we have the new humanized foreman who says, 'This action of mine is what the facts call for.'

“The operators, by all means, should have a 'say so' in the standardization of the work. This brings about better understanding among the operators themselves, for it permits all of them to weigh their worth and suggest changes. And, when standards are set, being selfset and agreed upon, they will be followed more willingly. For what we have a part in, we not only understand, but feel we ought to stick to and carry out in good faith.

“It has been a pleasure to talk in this free way, I assure you. It has tired my body but refreshed my mind.”